



Why Theory Matters

—Victoria Flanagan

Mallan, Kerry, and Clare Bradford, eds. *Contemporary Children's Literature and Film: Engaging with Theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011. 240 pp. \$28.00 pb. ISBN 978-0-230-23150-4. Print.

Contemporary Children's Literature and Film: Engaging with Theory sets out to reveal how theory informs critical interpretations of children's literature and film. It includes essays from both leading and emerging children's literature scholars from around the world who examine children's texts from a plethora of theoretical approaches: John Stephens uses cognitive poetics to demonstrate how picture books model attitudes toward significant social ideologies such as cultural diversity; Clare Bradford and Raffaella Baccolini analyze the representation of space in children's books and films using a theoretical framework that interweaves cultural geography, postcolonial theory, and utopian studies; Elizabeth Bullen and Kerry Mallan employ cultural theories of

globalization to argue that children's texts provide evidence of a dynamic interplay between the global and the local in their depiction of modern life; Maria Takolander makes a disquieting case about the pervasive Gothic and thus inherently misogynistic construction of femininity in the animated film *Monster House*; Christine Wilkie-Stibbs furthers this gendered theme in her exploration of transgender subjectivity in a range of young adult fiction and in the excellent French film *Ma vie en rose*, using a conceptual framework that draws on the theories of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick; David Buchbinder's topic is adaptation theory, which he uses to illuminate the relationship(s) between an "original" text and its adaptation(s); and the book closes with Mallan's

chapter on posthumanism and its increasing relevance to children's literature.

The book is ambitious in scope, opening by asking readers direct questions: "Does theory matter any more? Is it time for its obituary? Or are reports of the death of theory greatly exaggerated?" (1). Mallan and Bradford answer these questions in an introduction that is both compelling and intellectually provocative. They consider the claims against theory (that it fails to take into account "real" readers or viewers; that it is elitist; that it fails to take literature as a subject; that it encourages poor reading) carefully, in a manner that clearly establishes the relevance and necessity of theory to current academic discussions of children's literature. As they put it, the connections between children's literature, children's film, and critical theory

reflect the way in which children's texts are caught up in wider cultural, political, and social spheres of activity. Texts and theory are performative: they do something, and therefore incur important ethical responsibilities. These ethical responsibilities are not narrowly conceived in terms of moral content and values (or lack of them) advanced by texts. Rather, they are concerned with larger issues of truth, representation, and being (selfhood, identity, subjectivity). Such issues form the touchstones of literature and film, regardless of age classification; they are also the enduring concerns of theory. (8–9)

According to the editors, the intention of this particular collection of essays is thus to show the capacity of theory to "engage and stimulate our thinking, assist in our formulation of ideas, and scrutinize 'facts,' discourse and language" (9).

Does the book succeed in its goal? Several chapters do an extremely commendable job of showing how theory can achieve all this and more. John Stephens's chapter on schemas and scripts deals with subject matter that seems to be emerging as the latest trend in contemporary children's literature criticism: the application of cognitive science to literary criticism. Using the representation of cultural diversity as his context, Stephens analyzes the cognitive processes that a reader uses to make sense of a text, suggesting that the "sustained mapping of a schema throughout a text is a key element in drawing out the significance from the story world, because once readers recognize and mentally instantiate the schema, the recurrence or addition of further components enables the schema to be modified for socially transformative purposes" (15). He focuses on picture books, arguing that the modification of cognitive scripts and schemas in a text—particularly in relation to self/other relationships—can play an extremely powerful role in promoting social justice. One of the most interesting points raised here is that the conventional script for representations of encounters with strangers in picture books is one that naturalizes self/other conflict. Such a



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script is obviously problematic if a thematic concern of such books is to foster notions of social equality in young readers. This chapter is an engaging starting point for a book that seeks to demonstrate the importance of theory to children's literary criticism, as Stephens uses cognitive poetics to construct an elegant and persuasive argument about changing normative (and implicitly racist) social ideologies through the use of scripts and schemas. His chapter also stands out because of the manner in which it deliberately subverts the contestation (articulated in Mallan and Bradford's introduction) that theory fails to take into account the "real" reader. Stephens shows how theory can focus explicitly on the reader, illuminating the various cognitive processes used to draw thematic significance out of a story.

Baccolini and Bradford's interpretation of spatiality in children's texts in Chapter 2 offers readers an engaging and complex analysis of space that is innovative because of its multi-dimensional theoretical frame. They argue that the utopian genre of writing is one that is dependent on spatial metaphors and proceed to demonstrate how in dystopian fantasies such as M. T. Anderson's *Feed* and Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* "the spatial organization on which the new world order is fashioned serves to maintain inequalities" (50). In each novel, less privileged social groups are physically relegated to inhabiting lower realms of the earth.

Mallan's discussion of posthumanism in Chapter 8 as it relates to children's texts is also worthy of mention. She focuses primarily on one issue, the relationship between human beings and machines, and provides a brief history of how this relationship has traditionally been conceived within hierarchical terms. The increasing prevalence of technology in the late twentieth century,

however, has meant that previously clear differences between humans and machines are becoming less and less distinct. She considers the figure of the cyborg, a figure made famous by Donna Haraway in her seminal essay "Cyborg Manifesto," which can be used to make sense of recent children's literature that explores the effects of technology on the human body, subjectivity, and society. A strength of this chapter is its primary corpus, which has been assembled out of children's books and films that span multiple genres and age groups. She illustrates her contentions about posthumanism by referring to graphic novels such as *The Lunch Lady and the Cyborg Substitute*, cult classic anime films such as *Ghost in the Shell*, and the award-winning picture book *The Lost Thing*, and by extending her argument to incorporate less overtly posthuman works of literature, such as David Almond's *Clay*. This corpus adds force to Mallan's arguments, demonstrating that children's texts, which are often accused of being ideologically conservative, are exploring the effects of technology on the human condition in nuanced and complex ways.

The ability of theory to pose questions that open texts up in new and unexpected ways is clearly evident in Wilkie-Stibbs's chapter, "Splitting the Difference: Pleasure, Desire and Intersubjectivity in Children's Literature and Film" (a somewhat opaque title, given that the chapter deals with representations of LGBTQ subjectivities). Wilkie-Stibbs weaves together Butlerian

gender theory, Sedgwick's ideas about queerness, Donald Winnicott's concept of transitional phenomena as it relates to space, and Jessica Benjamin's psychoanalytic concept of intersubjectivity to propose that the key to resisting the processes of normalization and homogenization in narratives that revolve around characters with non-normative gender or sexual identities lies in "relations within intersubjective space" (106). This chapter stands out from some of the others because of its exceedingly competent methodology: Wilkie-Stibbs crafts a cohesive theoretical framework, drawing on the work of three different theorists, and each component of this conceptual structure is then illustrated by astute textual analysis. She also employs a theoretical framework that enables her to draw effective comparisons between her texts, something that is not always evident in other chapters. Her discussion of children's books and of one film shows that theory can indeed be productive for literary criticism, as in this case the result is a fine study of textual representations of LGBTQ subjectivities.

Wilkie-Stibbs's proficient handling of a theoretical frame in this chapter raises the significant issue of how theory can or should affect a writer's research methodology. To me, this seems to be a strange omission that, in a book ostensibly dedicated to demonstrating how theory can be gainfully employed by practitioners of children's literary criticism, there is little evidence of any reflection by either the editors

or the contributors on the relationship between theory and methodology. The implicit assumption, therefore, is that using theory *necessarily* enables print and media texts to be interpreted in new and original ways. I am not sure that this is actually the case, and it seems fairly obvious that some of the chapters in this book are better than others, primarily because these particular chapters are able to “use” theory more productively: their theoretical orientation is clear, their argument develops logically within a clear structure, and the theoretical concepts that frame the argument are carried through in the textual analysis. Because the volume does not contain any meditation on *how* theory can be used to produce innovative and significant interpretations of children’s texts, a further complication is the impression, upon finishing the book, that its chapters are rather random and unrelated (as if one had just finished reading an issue of a scholarly journal, rather than an edited collection of essays). As the editors mention in their introduction, the chapters showcase the work of pioneering theorists such as Lacan, Foucault, Appadurai, Kristeva,

Baudrillard, and Deleuze, but perhaps a stronger attempt could have been made to address the question of why the work of these theoreticians is particularly apposite to children’s literature and film as well as why some theoretical approaches are more effective than others. Listing the theorists whose work has influenced the textual analysis contained in this book seems to be a rather ineffective way to link what are otherwise fairly disparate chapters. A more adept connection could have been made, perhaps, if the editors and contributors had reflected on their research methodologies and articulated some of the typically unspoken thought processes that are involved in writing a piece of literary criticism that uses a particular theoretical framework.

Aside from these minor quibbles, *Contemporary Children’s Literature and Film: Engaging with Theory* is an interesting and thought-provoking read. It traverses a diverse theoretical field and should be commended for providing an impressive collection of essays that showcases many of the new directions in contemporary children’s literature research.

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